TweetTER: A Benchmark for Target Entity Retrieval on Twitter without Knowledge Bases

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Abstract

Entity linking is a well-established task in NLP consisting of associating entity mentions with entries in a knowledge base. Current models have demonstrated competitive performance in standard text settings. However, when it comes to noisy domains such as social media, certain challenges still persist. Typically, to evaluate entity linking on existing benchmarks, a comprehensive knowledge base is necessary and models are expected to possess an understanding of all the entities contained within the knowledge base. However, in practical scenarios where the objective is to retrieve sentences specifically related to a particular entity, strict adherence to a complete understanding of all entities in the knowledge base may not be necessary. To address this gap, we introduce TweetTER (Tweet Target Entity Retrieval), a novel benchmark that aims to bridge the challenges in entity linking. The distinguishing feature of this benchmark is its approach of re-framing entity linking as a binary entity retrieval task. This enables the evaluation of language models' performance without relying on a conventional knowledge base, providing a more practical and versatile evaluation framework for assessing the effectiveness of language models in entity retrieval tasks.

Keywords: Entity Linking, Twitter, Target Entity Retrieval

1. Introduction

Word Sense Disambiguation (Navigli, 2009, WSD) and Entity Linking (Ling et al., 2015, EL) are two long-standing tasks in language understanding. In these tasks, the primary goal is to associate a given word with either a specific sense in a sense inventory (e.g., WordNet for WSD) or an entity in a knowledge base (e.g., Wikipedia for EL). However, relying on specific underlying inventories poses certain limitations on the types of models that can be effectively evaluated. It assumes that the models have the ability to store and process information about the entire knowledge base, which may not always be practical or feasible due to the sheer size and complexity of such resources. Knowledge bases such as Wikidata¹ are composed of tens of millions of entities, resulting in a substantial number of plausible choices for a given entity, many of which might be either outdated or refer to unconventional usage of the entity. The high granularity often makes the task of entity linking too challenging or even impractical, particularly in noisy settings such as social media (Liu et al., 2013).

However, in realistic scenarios, understanding the specific entity of interest is often sufficient to retrieve relevant sentences from a text corpus. For example, a company launching a new product with an ambiguous name may seek to analyze its impact on social media. In such cases, there is no requirement for a model to encode knowledge about all potential candidate entities. Instead, the focus should

| Ρ | Context | Obama published his memoirs last year. | | | | | | | |
|---|------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| | Definition | Former president of the USA | | | | | | | |
| N | Context | I can't wait to see the new Tom Hanks movie. | | | | | | | |
| | Definition | Renowned physicist and Nobel laureate | | | | | | | |

Table 1: Example positive (P) and negative (N) samples for two target entities (underlined).

be on retrieving information related to a particular sense or instance of the entity, making it unnecessary to store knowledge about every possible entity in the model.

To address these challenges, we propose an alternative formulation for the standard EL task. Inspired by the WiC-TSV dataset (Breit et al., 2021), we put forward TweetTER (Tweet Target Entity Retrieval), a benchmark for entity linking in the noisy domain of Twitter that does not rely on any specific knowledge base. Our benchmark stems from TweetNERD (Mishra et al., 2022), a dataset for conventional entity linking. However, the task in our benchmark is re-framed as a simple retrieval one: given an input tweet, a target entity, and its definition, the objective is to determine whether the provided definition matches the target entity mentioned in the input tweet (context). Table 1 shows examples for each of the two possible classes (positive or negative) in this binary classification task.

Thanks to its re-framing of the original linking task as a retrieval one, our benchmark enables a seamless evaluation of unsupervised and supervised

¹https://www.wikidata.org/

techniques based on language models. We conduct an evaluation of different pre-trained language models on the TweetTER benchmark in zero-shot, few-shot and full fine-tuning settings. The results show how language models can be successfully applied on the task, which reinforces the practical utility of the dataset, while also suggesting room for improvement. In particular, the task proves challenging for in-context learning (ICL) approaches based on large language models, while fine-tuning of pre-trained encoder-based models tend to perform best overall.

2. TweetTER: The Dataset

In this section, we explain the construction process of TweetTER. First, we describe the entity linking dataset on which our benchmark is constructed (Section 2.1). Then, we explain in detail the strategy we followed to convert the entity linking task into a retrieval one (Section 2.2). Finally, we present the evaluation splits and statistics of the dataset in Section 2.3.

2.1. TweetNERD

TweetNERD (Mishra et al., 2022) is a dataset for named entity recognition and linking that comprises over 340,000 instances.² Each instance consists of a tweet, a target phrase within the tweet, the start and end span of the target phrase, and a Wikidata item ID. The Wikidata item ID provides information about the entity to which the target phrase refers in the context of the tweet.

2.2. From Entity Linking to Retrieval

Using TweetNERD as the starting point, we perform the following processing steps to re-formulate the task and obtain TweetTER:

Pre-Processing. First, instances in the Tweet-NERD dataset that had ambiguous³ or out-ofknowledge base target phrases were removed. Also, tweets starting with a user mention were excluded from the dataset since they were likely replies that might not provide sufficient context. Additionally, tweets containing URLs, including those with images, were also removed to focus solely on the textual content. User mentions within the remaining tweets were replaced with a generic

| Processing step | Instances |
|--|-----------|
| Original | 475,990 |
| Tweets available | 399,524 |
| Annotated | 219,696 |
| More than one possible candidate | 203,751 |
| URLs removed | 130,789 |
| Replies removed | 77,742 |
| Short tweets removed | 72,965 |
| Long target phrases removed | 67,256 |
| Low page views removed | 60,483 |
| Instances with duplicated tweets removed | 39,103 |

Table 2: Number of instances remaining after each processing step.

"@user" token unless the user was listed as a verified user.⁴ Moreover, instances with tweets containing less than 7 words were discarded to ensure an adequate amount of context for accurate classification. Similarly, instances with target phrases longer than 3 words were removed. Finally, to avoid redundancy and maintain diversity in the dataset, duplicate tweets were dropped, retaining only a single instance per unique tweet.

After completing the pre-processing, we were left with 39,103 instances out of the initial 475,990 instances from TweetNERD. The detailed count of remaining instances after each pre-processing step is presented in Table 2.

Candidate generation. To obtain disambiguation candidates for each target entity, up to 10 candidates for each target word were obtained by querying the Wikidata search API and selecting the top 10 results. These candidates would potentially match the target word and serve as possible definitions. Candidates with low page views, specifically less than 1000, were eliminated based on the QRank signal⁵. This step was aimed to reduce noise in the dataset and prioritize candidates that were more likely to provide reliable and commonly accepted definitions.

Task reformulation. The remaining TweetNERD instances were divided into different buckets based on their tweet dates, with each bucket reserved for creating various splits (e.g., train, validation, test). Specifically, tweets for the training bucket were chosen to be older than those of the validation and test buckets, imposing a temporal ordering

²Due to changes in the availability and privacy settings of certain tweets, it was not possible to retrieve all the 340,000 tweet IDs included in the original TweetNERD dataset.

³The *ambiguous* tag was used in the original dataset for indicating instances that were not possible to disambiguate even given the context.

⁴The compilation of the verified user list occurred prior to the introduction of Twitter Blue, making it a valuable proxy for identifying well-known personalities on the platform.

⁵https://github.com/brawer/wikidata-qrank

| | Train | Validation | Test | OOD | Academic |
|--------------------------|--------|------------|--------|-------|----------|
| Number of samples | 17,868 | 3,772 | 18,198 | 2,244 | 7,302 |
| Number of unique targets | 6,151 | 1,533 | 7,532 | 1,297 | 1,110 |
| Average tweet length | 131 | 123 | 132 | 131 | 92 |

Table 3: Statistics of the various splits of the TweetTER dataset.

in the dataset. This was done to ensure a more realistic setting, which in turn would be more challenging as shown in similar Twitter-related tasks (Ushio et al., 2022; Antypas et al., 2022). Also, to ensure a balanced representation of both matching and non-matching instances, in the training and validation splits, for each tweet we create a single positive instance and a single negative instance in the respective buckets.

The test set was handled differently; to introduce a more challenging evaluation, we generated both a positive and a negative sample in half of the instances within the test bucket. For the remaining half, we either created a single positive or a single negative instance per tweet. The rationale behind this choice is to prevent the creation of predictable patterns where each positive instance is consistently paired with a negative instance, potentially leading to biased model behavior. By mixing the labeling approach, we aim to challenge systems to genuinely predict the label of each instance rather than exploiting predictable patterns.

For positive instances (matches), the definition assigned was the one corresponding to the gold Wikidata item ID of the target word. For negative instances (non-matches), we randomly chose a candidate definition from those having a token overlap similarity of no more than 0.9 with the gold definition. This selection process aimed to provide a diverse set of non-matching definitions that were distinct from the correct definition.

2.3. Data Splits

In addition to the standard train/test/validation splits, TweetNERD also includes Out-of-Domain (OOD) and academic test splits (Mishra et al., 2022). The OOD test split, consisting of 25,000 tweets, focuses on tweets from a shorter time frame, deliberately emphasizing entities that are more challenging to disambiguate. The sampling process is designed to reflect the diversity of potential candidates for the mentioned entity. The academic test split, is a subset of 30,000 tweets that are sampled from existing academic benchmarks and have been reannotated to comply with TweetNERD guidelines. Including this split adds temporal diversity and incorporates previously benchmarked datasets into the evaluation of TweetNERD.

Table 3 provides an overview of the statistics

for the different splits within the dataset. In terms of size, we aimed for a train/validation/test split of 45/10/45. However, due to various processing steps involved, the final sizes of the splits may vary, as it is challenging to precisely track and maintain consistent proportions throughout the entire process. TweetTER is available through HuggingFace Datasets.⁶

3. Evaluation

In order to get a better understanding of the challenging nature of the proposed task, we test a suite of LMs on the TweetTER benchmark.

Evaluation Metrics. As a retrieval-inspired task, we report standard information retrieval evaluation metrics such as precision, recall and F1 on the positive class, as well as accuracy.

3.1. Comparison systems

Supervised Evaluation. In this supervised setting, we feed the concatenation of the context and definition, separated by the model's separator token, as input to each model. Following this, we take the average embeddings of both the target phrase sub-tokens and the definition sub-tokens. These average embeddings serve as representations of the respective elements. By taking the difference between the two embeddings, we derive a resulting vector that captures the contextual relationship between the target phrase and its definition. This resulting vector is then fed into a classifier layer. Finally, we fine-tune the entire architecture on the training set of TweetTER. In our supervised configuration, we opt for relatively small language models. This choice is in line with common practice for finetuning scenarios, as practical constraints often limit the use of larger models due to computational expenses. Specifically, we utilize the BERT-large (Devlin et al., 2019), RoBERTa-large (Liu et al., 2019), and RoBERTa-large-twitter models (Loureiro et al., 2022), the latter being a RoBERTa language model specifically trained on Twitter domain data.

⁶https://huggingface.co/datasets/cardiffnlp/ tweet_ter

Zero-Shot Evaluation. For the zero-shot configuration, we employed the capabilities of large language models, namely InstructGPT (Ouyang et al., 2022) and various sizes of Flan-T5 models (Chung et al., 2022), which typically excel in zeroshot applications, as opposed to smaller models like RoBERTa, which need to be fine-tuned for specific tasks. To accomplish this, we adopt a straightforward approach of converting each sample into a prompt using a predefined prompting template, which is then passed as input to the model. Given a test instance consisting of a tweet, a specific target word within the tweet, and a candidate definition, all components are integrated into the following prompt:

Based on the tweet, is the definition of the target correct? Text: [Tweet] Target: [Target Word] Definition: [Candidat Definition] Options: [Yes, No]

Subsequently, minimal regular expression processing is applied to the resulting generation, in order to derive the prediction label. In the few cases where instances cannot be parsed into an acceptable label, we select one of the two available options at random.

Few-shot Evaluation. In the few-shot setting, we follow the same prompt template as in the zero-shot configuration. However, we present three distinct annotated positive and three negative instances to the model, prior to introducing our query instance. Also, similar to the zero-shot scenario, the reported numbers are averaged over 3 different runs. For each run, we utilize a different set of sampled few-shot instances as examples provided to the model.

3.2. Analysis of Results

Table 4 shows the experimental results on the TweetTER dataset. Given the balancedness of the dataset (50% positive instances and 50% negative instances), performance is reported in terms of accuracy. Furthermore, as a convention in the entity retrieval setting, we report the precision, recall, and F1 scores of the positive class for additional insights.

Zero-Shot Versus Few-Shot. When comparing zero-shot and few-shot systems, the differences in their performance seem negligible. Specifically, smaller models demonstrate inferior performance in few-shot scenarios, whereas the top-performing model, Instruct GPT, exhibits a slight improvement in few-shot performance compared to zero-shot settings. Regarding the inferior performance of smaller models in few-shot setting, our assumption

is that the limited set of examples might lead to biased behaviour, as the models are then tasked with classifying entities from a diverse array of types and domains, potentially undermining their ability to generalize effectively across broader contexts.

ICL Versus Fine-Tuning. ICL systems are lagging behind their fine-tuning counterparts. This may imply that LLMs do not encapsulate sufficient knowledge within their parameters. Consequently, they might require an external knowledge base to address their shortcomings.

To provide further support for this argument, we partition the test instances into two categories: those with target words present in the training set and those without. For the segment with target words seen in the training data, the accuracy of the best-performing zero-shot model is 82.7%, whereas the best-performing fine-tuning model achieves an accuracy of 90.1%. In contrast, for the segment with target words unseen in the training data, the respective accuracy figures are 76.7% for the zero-shot model and 78.7% for the fine-tuning model. This implies that having access to the additional data provided in the training set, gives finetuning models a distinct advantage, an advantage that is reduced when dealing with unseen target words.

Human Versus Machine. As a proxy to measure human performance on the task, we randomly selected a representative sample of 180 instances from the test set (referred to as the human subset in the table) while maintaining the class balance. Additionally, to measure human agreement, we further narrowed down this group by sub-sampling 30 instances from the aforementioned 180. This subsample was subsequently subjected to a secondary annotator's evaluation to measure the extent of agreement between their respective annotations.

With the exception of RoBERTa-L, the results suggest that LMs generally demonstrate lower performance levels when contrasted with human annotators (see *Human* row of Table 4), which suggests that the task remains challenging for the majority of the baselines. Moreover, there is a 83% agreement between the two human annotators. However, this percentage drops to 74% when comparing human annotations against the best-performing fine-tuning model and further to 73% when comparing human annotations against the best-performing zero-shot model. These numbers highlight the divergent prediction processes between humans and LMs.

Prediction Bias. In the case of better performing ICL systems, another notable observation is the lower recall scores compared to higher precision. This observation may indicate that when facing

| | | Test | | | | OOD | | | | Academic | | | | Human Subset | | | |
|-----------|--------------|------|------|-------|------|------|------|-------|------|----------|------|-------|------|--------------|------|-------|------|
| | | Acc | P+ | R+ | F1+ | Acc | P+ | R+ | F1+ | Acc | P+ | R+ | F1+ | Acc | P+ | R+ | F1+ |
| Tuning | BERT-L | 76.7 | 84.2 | 65.7 | 73.8 | 74.0 | 79.5 | 64.7 | 71.3 | 91.1 | 94.2 | 87.5 | 90.7 | 78.3 | 88.1 | 65.6 | 75.2 |
| | RoBERTa-L | 80.6 | 81.4 | 79.3 | 80.3 | 81.6 | 79.9 | 84.6 | 82.2 | 93.2 | 92.1 | 94.4 | 93.3 | 81.7 | 83.5 | 78.9 | 81.1 |
| | RoBERTa-T | 81.3 | 78.1 | 86.9 | 82.3 | 80.1 | 74.8 | 90.8 | 82.1 | 93.2 | 89.1 | 98.5 | 93.6 | 75.0 | 71.0 | 84.4 | 77.2 |
| Zero-shot | Flan-T5-S | 51.6 | 52.3 | 37.0 | 43.3 | 50.7 | 51.0 | 37.5 | 43.2 | 53.0 | 54.3 | 38.1 | 44.8 | 51.1 | 51.3 | 40.4 | 45.2 |
| | Flan-T5-B | 63.3 | 61.7 | 70.6 | 65.8 | 62.3 | 59.8 | 75.6 | 66.8 | 74.2 | 70.9 | 82.2 | 76.1 | 60.7 | 58.6 | 72.6 | 64.9 |
| | Flan-T5-L | 66.8 | 69.9 | 58.9 | 63.9 | 65.6 | 67.2 | 60.9 | 63.9 | 77.5 | 80.1 | 73.3 | 76.6 | 65.4 | 65.8 | 64.1 | 64.9 |
| | Flan-T5-XL | 70.0 | 75.9 | 58.8 | 66.2 | 69.8 | 74.3 | 60.5 | 66.7 | 80.4 | 83.3 | 76.0 | 79.5 | 71.1 | 75.1 | 63.3 | 68.7 |
| | Instruct-GPT | 78.3 | 87.4 | 66.0 | 75.2 | 79.0 | 84.0 | 71.6 | 77.3 | 85.7 | 89.0 | 81.5 | 85.1 | 77.4 | 83.5 | 68.5 | 75.1 |
| hot | Flan-T5-S | 51.1 | 51.7 | 34.4 | 41.3 | 50.1 | 50.3 | 34.0 | 40.5 | 52.3 | 53.8 | 33.0 | 40.9 | 49.8 | 50.2 | 30.4 | 37.5 |
| | Flan-T5-B | 60.5 | 62.3 | 53.4 | 57.5 | 61.5 | 61.8 | 60.9 | 61.3 | 68.4 | 69.8 | 64.9 | 67.2 | 58.1 | 58.4 | 56.3 | 57.3 |
| s-s | Flan-T5-L | 64.2 | 65.5 | 60.3 | 62.8 | 65.6 | 66.8 | 62.4 | 64.5 | 74.8 | 75.2 | 74.2 | 74.7 | 65.6 | 65.8 | 65.2 | 65.5 |
| Fe | Flan-T5-XL | 67.1 | 76.6 | 49.2 | 59.9 | 67.5 | 75.8 | 51.5 | 61.3 | 77.5 | 83.8 | 68.3 | 75.2 | 66.7 | 73.8 | 51.9 | 60.8 |
| | Instruct-GPT | 79.2 | 80.2 | 78.2 | 78.9 | 79.6 | 78.2 | 82.8 | 80.2 | 83.2 | 79.2 | 90.8 | 84.4 | 78.1 | 77.5 | 80.0 | 78.5 |
| | Human | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | _ | - | _ | _ | _ | 80.6 | 81.6 | 81.6 | 80.2 |
| | All Positive | 50.0 | 50.0 | 100.0 | 66.7 | 50.0 | 50.0 | 100.0 | 66.7 | 50.0 | 50.0 | 100.0 | 66.7 | 50.0 | 50.0 | 100.0 | 66.7 |

Table 4: Performance of different models in terms of accuracy (Acc), precision of positive class (P+), recall of positive class (R+), and F1-score of positive class (F1+). The model sizes are denoted as S (small), B (base), L (large), and XL (extra-large). Additionally, in "RoBERTA-T", the letter T signifies that it is a Twitter-specific version of the RoBERTA model.

challenging test instances, LLMs are more inclined to predict a non-match, as it is more probable that a given candidate definition does not accurately represent the target word. This behavior is less pronounced in fine-tuning systems.

Model Size. When it comes to the number of parameters, larger language models tend to exhibit better performance in zero- and few-shot settings, with the performance increasing consistently from the smallest model (Flan-T5 small) to the largest (Flan-T5-XL and Instruct-GPT). Smaller models seem to face difficulties when employed in zero- and few-shot scenarios. For instance, Flan-T5 small exhibits performance that closely resembles a random baseline.

Pre-Training Domain. In terms of the pre-training domain, it appears that RoBERTa-T (specifically trained on Twitter data) expectedly achieves better results than the regular RoBERTa model. Nonetheless, the difference is relatively small, with modest gains of 1 and 2 percentage points in accuracy and F1, respectively.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have presented TweetTER, a new task and benchmark for target entity retrieval on Twitter. By transforming the problem from a traditional entity disambiguation setting to a more retrieval-type one, we achieved two objectives. First, we make the task more practical in line with

downstream applications, and second, we render it more accessible for the usage and evaluation of language models, while ensuring a similar type of evaluation (Hauer and Kondrak, 2022). Additionally, we presented an analysis of the performance of various language model-based systems on our newly constructed benchmark. The results highlight the potential of fine-tuned models in this task, while exposing some limitations of LLMs in in-context learning settings.

Limitations

For this paper, we constructed a dataset using Wikidata as the reference knowledge base, and for English only. This can limit the conclusions we can take from the experiments (linked with Wikidata) and how generalisable approaches can be to other languages, especially in a domain as multilingual as social media. The amount of experiments is limited to a small number of models, mainly transformerbased language models, and conclusions may only applied to these specific models.

Ethics Statement

In this paper, we consider data from social media. We follow both the license of the input TweetNERD dataset as well as Twitter regulations for data storage. Moreover, we perform preprocessing steps for anonymizing the data (removing user names) and removing links. We only work with aggregated information and with information without user profiling – for the experiments only the preprocessing textual content is utilised.

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